

Viewing Achilles' shield

Richard Rutherford

When Hector killed Patroclus, Achilles lost the armour his friend had been borrowing. Searching for revenge, he asked his mother Thetis to commission a replacement shield from the smith-god Hephaestus. Richard Rutherford explores what this shield can tell us about the world of the *Iliad*.

A shield like no other

The forging of Achilles' shield in book 18 is one of the most famous scenes in the *Iliad*. It is doubly important because of its huge influence on later literature, establishing 'ecphrasis' (the extended description of a work of art – shield, engraved cup, sculpture, temple frieze, etc.) as a regular element in the poetic repertoire. Aeneas' shield in Virgil's epic is the best-known example. Homer and Virgil have been compared many times, but I will set that parallel aside and concentrate on some of the ways in which this episode justifies its place within the *Iliad* itself.

The shield of Achilles is unlike any ordinary shield, whether in reality or art. Elsewhere in the poem, the shield of Agamemnon has a Gorgon-head at its centre, 'and Fear was inscribed on it, and Terror – daemonic figures intended to horrify the king's opponents. Achilles' shield is entirely different. There we have a series of scenes which portray a wide range of human activities, many of them delightful – weddings, scenes of feasting, gathering in the grape-harvest, dancing, and much else.

Here is an outline of the scenes represented:

1. The universe viewed as a whole: earth, sea, and sky, and especially the heavenly bodies.
2. Two cities
 - (a) a city at peace, with scenes of weddings and of a legal trial for homicide in progress.
 - (b) a city at war, with scenes of defensive and offensive action.
3. Three scenes of rural activity, representing different stages of the agricultural year.
 - (a) Ploughing.
 - (b) Reaping.
 - (c) Gathering in the vintage.
4. A scene of oxen being led to pasture, and attacked by lions.
5. A scene including sheep grazing.
6. A scene of young men and women dancing.
7. The river Ocean surrounding the entire world.

What have the scenes on the shield got to do with Achilles?

If we ask what all this has got to do with Achilles, one approach is to see the shield as presenting the life that Achilles is forced to give up, the life he cannot have. The first scene in the city of peace is one of weddings, and Achilles is notoriously a loner, unmarried, dismissive of his concubine. He is enraged when

Agamemnon takes her away, but that is a matter of honour and pride, not a personal loss. When earlier in the poem he contemplated abandoning the war, he said that when he got home his father Peleus would organize a wedding for him, but by this point in book 18 we know that is never going to happen. So there is a relationship of contrast between that scene on the shield and the story told in the poem as a whole.

The second section, the lawcourt scene, is more complicated. There is a kind of parallel with the earlier plot of the *Iliad* in that two men are in conflict and argue about their rights in a public arena (like Agamemnon versus Achilles in *Iliad* 1). But then there was no formal trial or legalistic procedure, no council of elders – the only elder present, wise old Nestor, tried to make peace between them but failed. Also, the earlier dispute was not about a homicide. That aspect of the lawcourt scene looks forward rather than back: by the end of book 18, Achilles' anger is directed against Hector, who has killed his closest friend. But his intention is not of course to prosecute Hector, but to kill him. At a later stage when Hector ventures to suggest reaching some kind of agreement, Achilles rejects the proposal, declaring that he will not even accept compensation as payment for the return of Hector's corpse. In fact in the end he does receive ransom from Priam; but that is a private agreement and legal arbitration plays no part at any stage. So there is a complex set of parallels and contrasts between the legal scene and the main plot of the *Iliad*.

This kind of approach also has some value in the scene of the city at war: here too we have a scene which is in some ways quite similar to the main narrative of the *Iliad*, but in others diverges from it. Similarities include the pre-sence of opposing armies and a city under siege, like Troy in the *Iliad*. The gods play a part in the war on the shield, as at Troy, since we're told that Ares and Athena accompany one of the armies into battle (516 ff.). Here too there is talk of some kind of agreement (511), as the question whether to sack the city or share out the riches it contains has been discussed. But in other respects the warfare here is very unlike the scenes in the *Iliad*, which describes the open combat of armed warriors. The shield instead shows an ambush scene, in which one side attacks the herdsmen and flocks of the other side and a slaughter ensues. The *Iliad* is generally rather hostile to trickery and deception, but here we have the laying of a trap. In this scene the sides are ill-matched, the victims seem more helpless, and the fighting is generally on a smaller, less heroic scale.

Whose life?

So both the city at peace and the city at war seem to represent normal human life, as opposed to the extreme and extraordinary situation which exists at Troy and in which Achilles and his peers are involved. But when we say 'normal human life', that isn't specific enough. Do we mean the kind of life Achilles might have enjoyed had the war not taken place? I think the answer must be no. We're not being shown aristocratic or kingly life such as we witness Nestor and Menelaus enjoying during peacetime in the *Odyssey*. In the later rustic scenes, the characters seem to be farmers or herdsmen, peasants or simple country people. It's true that there is a king mentioned in one scene, but this is plainly a local lord of some kind, and his only role seems to be to preside benevolently over the harvest – and perhaps to entertain his workers at an *al fresco* picnic.

Should we then be thinking more of everyday life for the lower classes in the time of the Trojan war? If so, that would mean there is a social contrast between the main plot and the shield – the main plot describes the heroic achievements and failures of great aristocratic warriors, the shield portrays the unheroic and unmemorable lives of lesser men and women, even of children – yet these are lives which offer more in terms of happiness and fulfilment than the path of heroic warfare provides for Achilles.

Hephaestus' view

However we classify the images on the shield, we see them through the eyes of Hephaestus, the god who made them. This divine perspective affects the representation of reality. The scenes are distanced (as if Hephaestus were looking at earth through a telescope): they are vivid, life-like, but unreal, just as human life may seem small or trivial to Homer's gods. There is no geography – no indication of where any of these events is taking place. No names either, apart from Ares and Aphrodite, fellow deities. Besides the absence of place-names and people-names there is a certain lack of involvement – we are occasionally told that characters are 'eager' to do something (as the ploughmen are eager to reach the end of the furrow), and the king is 'joyful in his heart' (557), but there is little empathy. Hephaestus is not a god with any particular link to any of the mortal characters of the poem; his vision is general, detached, that of an onlooker rather than a committed supporter.

From another perspective, we can see an analogy between the poet and the god Hephaestus. Just as Hephaestus produces a shield, a physical artefact, of extraordinary intricacy and beauty, so the poet creates a poem, a verbal artefact of extraordinary intricacy and beauty. But to say there is an analogy doesn't really tell us much; it risks becoming a cliché. Often what really matters is the difference between the real poet and the artist within the text. To put it crudely, the world of the shield, the world Hephaestus envisions, is a distanced and impersonal world, whereas the world that Homer creates is full of human interest and empathy. Hephaestus' world view is in some ways larger – it shows a greater variety of human settings, it pictures the changing seasons and the farming calendar, it includes women and children, weddings and celebrations; but Homer's world view, though intense and focused, gives us so much more in terms of personalities, emotions, and not least speeches. There is no direct speech actually quoted on the shield, and that seems to be a restriction rigidly accepted by later ecphrasis. When

we think of the huge importance of speech-making in the epic, we see that the microcosmos of the shield has its limitations.

Life interrupted

To sum up, the shield presents a vision of the world that human beings inhabit, the world Achilles has to leave behind. This vision represents the normal life of ordinary people – it contrasts with the intensity and suffering of the hero's experience. True, the shield does not just depict beauty and peace; there is warfare and violence – the fighting armies, the attack by lions – but this violence is kept within bounds, it forms only a part of human existence. There is much else that is far more positive.

Yet despite the richness of this vision of life, it remains incomplete. We are shown fragments of human existence: we do not know who wins the lawsuit, which side will prevail in the battle around the second city, whether the herdsmen will manage to drive off the lions. The scenes are frozen in time (anticipating Keats's *Ode on a Grecian urn*). But I also argued that they are a god's vision of the human world, remote and detached. The epic poet is then not equivalent to the divine blacksmith. The shield is a marvel, 'a wonder to behold', as the poet says; but the *Iliad*, though a mortal creation, is more wonderful still.

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